

Testimony

Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee

February 17, 2011

Dr. Merle W. Harris

Senator Bye, Representative Willis, Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee,

I appreciate this opportunity to speak with you today about **Raised Bill 927, An Act Concerning Requirements for Early Childhood Educators**. Before discussing the bill, I want to establish my interest in this legislation. Many of you know me from my role as President of Charter Oak State College. In 2006 through 2008, while President, I served on the Early Childhood Workforce Committee. The major component of the legislation you are considering, calling for at least 50% of the teachers in state-funded early childhood programs to have a bachelor's degree in a field preparing them to work with young children and the remaining teachers to have at least an associate's degree in early childhood education, was a recommendation of that Committee. This is known as the 50/50 plan. Since retiring I have been working as a consultant along with Dr. Regina Miller, with the support of Connecticut Charts- A- Course, to assist Connecticut's 12 community colleges, as they have prepared to have their Early Childhood Education programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Dr. Miller and I also continue to work on a pilot project to develop and test implementation steps for an Early Childhood Education Credential.

Why is Raised Bill 927 important? We know that early childhood experiences do make a difference in children's readiness for school. Connecticut has expanded opportunities for young

children to participate in early childhood education programs and the goal of many, including Governor Malloy, is universal pre-K. We also know from research, “that when early childhood professionals have specialized training and education, children benefit.” (NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards, January 2010, p.9) And we want our children to reap these benefits.

You have heard data today showing we are moving in the right direction - more of our teachers have degrees. However, the current requirement of all teachers having a bachelor’s degree by 2015 may not be achievable. By requiring 50/50 by 2015, we are setting a realistic and attainable goal for all state funded programs. By adding the requirement that all teachers have the appropriate bachelor’s degree by 2020, again we are setting a goal which should be attainable. The dates recognize the progress we have made but also recognize that it takes adults who are working while going to school part time eight to ten years to earn a bachelor’s degree.

I would recommend a few changes in the proposed bill, as noted on the attached. Most important of these changes is the requirement that programs be approved by the Departments of Higher Education and Education. This will assure that programs have flexibility in how their students meet early childhood education standards but that all graduates are knowledgeable about developmentally appropriate practice and can enhance child development and learning, plan curriculum aligned with important learning outcomes and build positive relationships with students, families and other stakeholders.

Finally, I must tell you that we still do not have many programs in the designated fields at the bachelor’s level, particularly at our public institutions. Acting on this legislation, including the provision of financial aid from existing funds, will signal to our state universities the importance

of new, and perhaps collaborative, programs, and will signal to needy students in this low-paying field that there is some support to complete their education. Thank you!